

WELCOME 2nd May 2021 – 5 Easter '21 B

John 18:33b-38a & Matthew 22:15-22

Welcome! It's great to be together again. We are delighted you are here. As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources in your hands for you to use *over the course of the all-week. As God leads you into the fullness of His word & his work in your lives he will then introduce you to someone who needs to hear the good news from you. Also...somewhere along the way today you're likely to feel a tap on your shoulder or tug at your heart...song prayer word of scripture... Don't ignore it! That's probably the Holy Spirit prompting you some way. Let's talk about that after worship.*

As we move into this week...US President **Abraham Lincoln** once said, "Nearly all people can withstand adversity, but if you want to test their character, give them power." 100 years later, **John Kennedy** noted, "Mothers all want their sons to grow up to be President; but they don't want them to become politicians in the process." There is something about that link ^{b/t} politics & power that eats at the very core of those involved...there are great risks...

Jesus was no stranger to the threat of human political power...Pilate *claimed* to have it. The religious leaders surrounding Jesus were jealous of & afraid of those who did. But Jesus took no part in human exercises of power or politics & instead grants freedom & fullness of **life** beyond politics. In Christ, power is used to bless, to serve, to love, to restore, to give life that equips for his purposes in this world.

Jesus said, **My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom...** it's eternal & run by grace & the power of saving love. **Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, & give to God what belongs to God.** In all things, God alone is our Maker **AND** our Master. In all things his kingdom alone claims our full devotion loyalty & allegiance...our worship. In all things his word his promise determines who we are & how we are in this world We'll explore & experience that together. Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

God of promise power & hope, in your great mercy you have granted us new birth & eternal life through the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ...for that alone we thank & praise you!

Distracted by the world around us we often fail to hear your voice, or we hide when our faith is challenged by the world around us.

Forgive us, restore the love we had at first, & establish in us a faith that endures. By your Spirit fix our eyes fixed on you, Lord, & with you at our right hand we shall not be shaken. In all things lead us to live for your glory & the turning of hearts toward your salvation...we pray in Christ's name! Amen.

Let's hear God's Word...

FAITH CHAT:

1. When you hear the words "politics" or "power," what comes to mind? Why is that?
2. How comfortable are you challenging someone in authority? over what?

Now we'll sing...Even So Come...

5 Easter – '21 B – LIFE PULSE: LIFE BEYOND...POLITICS

In his mega-bestselling book “7 Habits of Highly Effective People,” author Steven Covey lists habit #2 “Begin w/ the end in mind.” #1 is be proactive, but #2 is... In essence, what do you want to be when you grow up? Aim for that. What sort of marriage do you want? Start w/ that pattern. What sort of kids do you want to release into the world as adults? Teach them from infancy... You get the idea... be intentional because you get nowhere by accident or coincidence... except lost or in a mess. Aim @ nothing you'll hit it.

So... the last few weeks we've ended worship w/ a **Take it home** piece where I invite you to take some part of the teaching/worship & decide: *How am I going to put that into practice in my life this week?* 'Cos if we're not doing that then we're wasting time... If we're not taking Sun morning & living it ^{b/t} now & Sat... we need a serious revisit of who we are & what we're up to. Today, I'm going to give you that bit 1st so **we** begin w/ the end in mind... & we're listening intentionally. Ready?

Ok... The Bible verse I'm going to say the most about today is also on your GP... & again... it's awesome if you bring your **BIBLES**... Mt 22:21 Jesus is being challenged by a double-team of his adversaries about whether it's ok/lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Ultimately his answer is: “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, & give to God what belongs to God.” And we know sometimes we mess that up & we get confused in deciding how to do that. Last week we saw that's what sin does to us & we all struggle w/ that every day... So for today: **What is** one “thing” you're going to take back from “Caesar” this week because it belongs to God? Caesar could be anything - your job, family, school, habit/addiction, peers/colleagues... What have you given over to someone/thing else & you understand it really belongs to God & you're going to take it back? Don't tell me now... but that's where we're going. “Begin w/ the end in mind.”

As Mt recounts his narrative of Jesus' life... Mt 22 is just past Palm Sunday... Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem where the crowd sings praises & shouts accolades honouring Jesus as king. They view him as the new David assuming he's going to restore the grandeur of their nation, kick the Romans out & raise them to glory & prominence as God's chosen people like they once were. 100/1000s of folks in J-salem

The religious/social hierarchy bigshots all soil their ephods... Why? Because there are simultaneously about 20-25K Roman soldiers in town to keep the rabble quiet. Why would the Romans need more than a Division of Infantry to guard Jerusalem? What are they worried about? Well... Rome was noted for doing things well as a world superpower. They did 3 things exceedingly well: 1 – kill people 2 – build things 3 – tax their subjects to pay for # 1 & #2 (their citizen's not so much)

And from the time Jesus was a little boy there had been revolts in & around Judea over taxes. In about 6AD, there was a revolt & Rome squashed it & crucified ≈ 50 people on the Mt of Olives & left the bodies hanging so folks got the message... Pay. Your. Taxes. About 35 years after Jesus lived/died/rose/returned to the Father there was another tax revolt & this time Rome had had a neck full of the Jews & sacked Jerusalem & tore the Temple apart stone by stone & killed 1000s... brutally. So throughout & beyond Jesus' life Roman taxes were not benign... There was lots of blood spilled over taxes. Taxes are always serious business.

Immediately following Jesus' jubilant ride into town, he rampages into the Temple & drives out the merchants & tumps over the money changers' tables calling them all a mess of thieves. Then he heals the lame/blind which is precisely what the Messiah was supposed to do... & don't think the Pharisees don't know it. To make it worse, Jesus tells parable after parable ripping strips off the Pharisees & other religious hotshots making it clear he views them as disobedient children, murderous thieving tenant farmers & phony baloney religious fakes. *He is not making any friends there!*

They've had enough & make an uneasy alliance w/ Jewish turncoats who actually support the Romans so they can do business w/o too much interference. Together they approach Jesus w/ **THE** question they're sure will box him into an inescapable trap & finish him for good. “**Is it** right/lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” You know the dilemma... He says, “**NO**,” the Romans will separate his head from his shoulders ^{b/4} the echo of his voice leaves the room. If he says “**YES**,” the mob that just praised him as king may well drag him out of town & stone him as a false prophet. Win-win for the religious/social hierarchy & lose-lose for Jesus so they think. But after asking to have a look at the Roman coin of the realm, the denarius, he gives a cryptic but stunning answer: “**Give** to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, & give to God what belongs to God.”

Now when most of us hear **that** answer, we picture in our minds a **2**-column ledger God on one side & Caesar/Emperor/World on the other... & we start thinking about how to neatly divide, segment, & compartmentalize our lives... like little kids sharing their M & Ms... 1 for you 1 for me 2 for you 2 for me... & we bust our lives up into little pieces & breathe a sigh of relief because just the very idea that there's a God-side & a not-God-side suggests that maybe God doesn't mind what I do w/ this part of my life. He's cool to let me run w/ this one on my own... Somehow or other we break out the pieces: \$\$, job, education, friends, sex, leisure, entertainment, worship, prayer, discipleship, service to others... arrange those over the 2 columns & think whew! But I want us to look more closely at the first part of Jesus' response to the supposedly unanswerable question... **Here**, show me the coin used for the tax.

Jesus sees through the “trap.” He’s not going to play a game w/ the rules rigged against him...He calls ‘em hypocrites because not only is the game rigged they know it’s rigged & all their flattery is just so much fertilizer. Then he asks for the coin Emperors minted their own coins w/ their own image on the coin. It was a way of reinforcing their rule. You can’t just use any old coin in a Roman mkt or to pay your taxes. You have to use approved coinage & what better way to enforce your rule your dominance than to have every Tom Dick & Mary trading in your image every time they need a loaf of bread, slab of meat or a few veggies for dinner? The symbolism & propaganda was just another aspect of the Roman boot to the necks of the conquered Jews. But the real issue...Jesus asks: **“Whose picture/image & title are on it?”**

Look at the coin. That’s Tiberius; wreathed in the laurels of victory in battle & divinity as befitting the god Roman Caesars thought themselves to be. Around his image are the words “Tiberius Caesar, Worshipful Son of the god, Augustus.” The heads-side of the coin is the image of Tiberius proclaiming himself son of god Augustus & as son he too is divine. You hear alarm bells? On the tails-side is the seated goddess Pax (peace) & the title Pontif Maxim - “high priest.” Tiberius has in the coin of the empire, declared himself divine son of god Augustus (his father) & high priest/king of peace.

What’s wrong w/ the coin? It’s an exquisite specimen of Roman propaganda & **an idol**. It imposes emperor worship & asserts Caesar’s sovereignty over all who trade w/ it. It is breathtakingly ironic. Jesus the Son of God & the High Priest & Prince of Peace, recently hailed as King, holds the tiny silver coin of a king who claims to be the son of a god & high priest of Roman peace. Jesus’ enemies should feel the hot light of the commandments against worship of graven images & devotion to any god but Yahweh shining right on them. That they would use the idol/image of a pretend god as a means of attack betrays their corruption. These are the same people who cry out at Jesus’ trial, *“We have no king but Caesar!”* Of course they don’t...Jesus knew that

So ***NB***...this entire episode is about more than taxes. It’s about more than how people of faith relate to the structures & systems of gov’t. Jesus is not asking us to divide our loyalties or compartmentalize our lives. There is no 2-column ledger. Instead Jesus holds out ^{b/4} us the reality of God & His Kingdom AND the competing reality of our emperors that claim pieces of our lives. Both insist upon our loyalty our devotion our worship our allegiance...but only one can claim us fully...heart, soul, mind & strength....only one offers us life & peace, hope & joy, love & strength w/ no strings attached...forever. You cannot serve 2 masters...cannot give yourself fully to 2 rulers...cannot subdivide your life into pieces...

Jesus understands...Caesar’s face is on that coin. He minted it & put it into circulation. There are privileges & rights that go along w/ being part of any earthly empire & taxes/laws are part & parcel...ultimately this isn’t about that...

Because more importantly...stamped on each of us is the image & likeness of God. If the coin (& what’s attached to it) can be marginally claimed by the emperor; then we & everything about us belongs to God. That means we are continually learning to pay back, surrender, & give to God ourselves our lives our very existence....& to take back from Caesar what isn’t his...

Standing above all of this...you & I, crafted in the image of God, have also been bought & paid for by the Only Son of the Father...**Christ is** *the visible image of the invisible God...God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, & through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven & on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross. – Col 1:15, 19-20* More than a mere tax has been paid for your life & mine...not silver or gold but his holy & precious blood & his innocent suffering & death.

There is only one ledger...Stamped across all of it is the cross of Jesus Christ. In all things, God alone is our Maker **AND** our Master. In all things his kingdom alone claims our full devotion loyalty & allegiance...our worship. In all things his word determines who we are & how we are in this world: **Jesus** *called them to him & said, “You know the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, & their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, & whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, & to give his life a ransom for many.” – Mt 20:25-28*

In Christ, power is used to bless, to serve, to love, to restore, to give life that equips for his purposes in this world. Caesars come & go. Empires rise & fall & some are forgotten forever. But God promises of the Reign of Jesus Christ: **His** *government & its peace will never end. He will rule with righteousness & justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. – Is 9:7* And at the last...all earthly kingdoms will fall & **The** *world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord & of his Christ, & he will reign forever & ever.” – Rev 11:15* Life beyond politics is not some imaginary utopia where “our Caesar” finally is on the throne/power/control...but life right now living out the image stamped on you since the creation of the world under the Lordship...rule of the one who has paid w/ his own life so you could have his life forever.

Take it home... What is one “thing” you’re going to take back from “Caesar” this week because it belongs to God?

30 secs... **Go...Swap**... I’ll pray for us to close...